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# Sir Thomas Browne: Backgrounds of Religio Medici and Christian Morals

William David Wilkins

*Loyola University Chicago*

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OF RELIGIO MEDICI AND  
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Preconceived notions about the qualities of the writing of Sir Thomas Browne have had a tendency to obscure the thought-content of his works. Saintsbury is typical among earlier critics when he calls attention to the "triumph in Browne of the ornate style" (1). This same critic credited Browne with being one of the "supreme writers of English prose" (2), and noted his "absolutely sublime rhetoric" (3). All critics seem to agree that Browne was a master stylist. This critical consensus is lauding one quality tended to make one

- (1) G. Saintsbury. A History of English Prose Rhythm. 182. London, 1922.
- (2) G. Saintsbury. A Short History of English Literature. 147. London, 1919.
- (3) Ward, (ed.) "Antiquaries," by G. Saintsbury, in Cambridge History of English Literature. VII, 268.

believe that other qualities might be lacking in Browne. Present day critics are beginning to devote more study to the ideas in Browne and to call attention to characteristics other than the style. Among the latter the works of Dunn (4), Sencourt (5), and Leroy (6) are significant. It is found that the thought, no less than the prose in which it is written, has surpassing beauty and original force.

Sir Edmund Gosse has said that the ideas of Browne "are the average ideas of intelligent persons in the early part of the seventeenth century" (7). In some measure Browne is typical of his age but his thinking is remarkable because it is a blending of medieval philosophy tempered by the onrush of scientific inquiry and the advancement of learning. The thought, moreover, found expression in works notable not only for force and style, but for dignity of sentiment, variety of allusions, and depth.

The mind of Browne held a curious medley. In

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| (4) William Dunn.    | <u>Sir Thomas Browne, A Study in Religious Philosophy.</u> Wisconsin, 1926.    |
| (5) Robert Sencourt. | <u>Outflying Philosophy.</u> London, 1913.                                     |
| (6) Olivier Leroy.   | <u>Le Chevalier Thomas Browne, sa vie, sa pensee, et son art.</u> Paris, 1928. |
| (7) Edmund Gosse.    | <u>Sir Thomas Browne.</u> London, 1924.  |

this medley we shall see the fantastic character of the period. He is a good mirror of his age because he reflects both the highest attainments and the most flagrant limitations. His personality has affinities with Burton and with Donne and the "metaphysical" poets. Because his writing has some of the confessional spirit of Montaigne and St. Augustine and Newman we more readily sympathize with the picture presented. As naturalist, skilled physician, antiquary, and curious speculative philosopher he shall be remembered as typical to a great extent of the erudite ingenuity of the intellectual life of the commonwealth and restoration.

When we have pointed out Browne's relationship to the seventeenth century we shall further attempt to demonstrate that the philosophy of Browne has scholastic elements which must be considered as a necessary part to an understanding of him; that these scholastic elements may be indicated by a comparison of the Religio Medici and Christian Morals to two scholastic treatises chosen from the library of Browne.

## Chapter II

### BROWNE'S RELATION TO SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

Browne lived in a wonderful age; the enlargement of the circle of secular and scientific knowledge was a bewilderment, and the more so, because it had the promise of continuing, and that with greater rapidity and more signal results, not only along known lines, but with divagations into fields at present vague, with promise of rich rewards in valleys tempting to explore. Scientific knowledge was growing by fits and starts; hypotheses rose and fell. The scientific spirit of inquiry, in its infancy, was finding various stumbling blocks--for those interested in such inquiry could not anticipate which hypotheses would keep their ground, and what the state of knowledge in relation to them would be from year to year. The men of the age had a genius for handling what scientific knowledge they had with some imagination. The fact that Sir Thomas Browne was one of the most adept in discussing in an imaginative way what science or his own curious digging unearthed may have kept him from attaining a position in the Royal Society.

The average mind saw the age as the dawn of a



wondrous era; scientific interest took the form, in spite of the care of the Royal Society, of a luxurious revelling in the rich and strange. The inventive curiosity of the century saw the general public hastening in to believe marvels when only hypotheses were being projected. It was the natural concomitant of an age in which even the mind of Bacon could not sort and divide the real from the unreal.

The "learned animadversions" of Browne have very little appeal in the present day to those who look primarily for something of practical interest and to those who demand exactitude in science. His learning is spoken of without respect; but this only provokes doubt in the minds of those more favorable toward Browne as to the coextensiveness of the speaker's own erudition. Browne was firm in his beliefs. He had a desire to exhibit truth and a literary gift hardly surpassed in its own way for expounding it. It was impossible that such gifts of thought and expression should not find a way into print. Some of his works may seem but a scrap-heap of out-of-date observations if looked at with a scientific eye; the man of more general breadth is prepared to look upon divagations along various paths with a more kindly eye.

The Renaissance had unearthed new knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Sir Thomas Browne approached this knowledge openly and with a welcome for it was his hobby to oppose error and receive innovations which might clear up much of what he knew to be unscientific superstitions. His approach was that of a man classically educated. This classical education meant an education based upon medieval thought. Added to this is Browne's immense respect for the past, so evident in all his writing. We see that his mind saw knowledge concealed in an urn; that this knowledge was a buried treasure in the search for which the ground had been barely touched; this meant, for Browne, that science was also an antiquarian process, the process of unearthing this forgotten lore. Scientific methods were in their infancy, as I have indicated, and bereft of methods, Browne rejected the past with regret, would attribute all seemingly "new" items to something with which he was familiar.

There was nothing tangible in the new age by which one could judge the direction one should take. One could only grope between two roads; no signposts pointed the way. The scholastic philosophy, based upon Aristotle, had held such long supremacy that its ingrained dicta were hard to shake off. Our modern age

has gained a point of view at least. Some of us adhere to the scholastic doctrines. Those of us who have substituted other systems have the intricacies smoothed out a bit by this day. The seventeenth century was beginning to reject the old but had nothing of dogmatical certitude to hitch to. Bacon was engaged in working out his perplexing system of philosophy. He was still indebted to scholasticism and was in harmony with many of its doctrines. Exploration, with Bacon as with many of his age, had outrun method. Some of his ideas bore fruit of which he did not dream. Although some of the experimenters were dreamers they could not anticipate the far-reaching consequences of research and scientific method. The men of the age were not only heralding prophets in science but the day and age was seeing revolutions in politics, in social life, and in religion. The latter field was torn up by a passionate controversy on the forms of the Christian religion and a search, so constant that with some it was an obsession, for the way of salvation (8).

Our day sees a trend away from the arguments ad hominem in religious controversy. In the Victorian

(8) Logouis and Cazamian. History of English Literature. 539.

epoch Newman replied to a vitriolic Kingsley that the topic was above the level of personalities (9). In the present day such antagonists as the unbeliever Joad and the Christian Lunn have shown that religious controversy may be carried on in a spirited manner while the opponents still respect and admire each other (10).

In the early part of the seventeenth century the new political body, conveniently called a "church" (11), had settled down to a characteristically lukewarm and indolent attitude. This attitude was disturbed by the agitation of the zealous Calvinists who were able for a time to establish Presbyterian discipline in the country, and again by the Independents who wanted free interpretation of the Bible. The Episcopalians by their zeal further excited the pious fervour of the people. This variety of religions and the antagonism one to the other gave to the generation its character.

The underlying reason for all this controversy, of course, was the lack of authority in any. Every

{ 9) J. H. Newman. Apologia Pro Vita Sua.

(10) C.E.M. Joad and  
Arnold Lunn.

(11) H. Belloc.

Is Christianity True?

"Introduction" to O'Connell's  
Apologia Pro Vita Sua. "The Church  
of England is not a body of doctrine;  
it is a national institution."

sectarian damned every other on the basis of his own interpretation of the Bible. Free interpretation has always meant as many religions as there are readers.

The men of the seventeenth century specialized, it seems, in arguments ad hominem. Intellectual right and wrong were felt to be as much opposed as God and the devil. In the polemics no person would grant that his antagonist might have good points for his side of the argument. It was never thought that an argument might have two sides, or that the opponent might have good sense, or even decency. The seventeenth century man could call an adherent to another faith names which would, in our day, prove rich and fruitful evidence in a libel suit. Sprat tells us that the Royal Society was glad to keep clear of theological disputes; they were afraid, he says, of "falling in talking instead of working" (12).

There was one small liberal group in England at this time which expressed sane and moderate views. Its more prominent members were Browne, Hooker, Bacon, Hales, Falkland, and Chillingworth.

(12) Thomas Sprat, (1635-1713) Transactions of the Royal Society, Vol. I.

Hooker, in The Ecclesiastical Polity (1592) transcended partisan controversy. He was noted not only for a sanely balanced rationalism but for an historical perspective extraordinary for his age. He was tolerant of everything but dogmatism and possessed a gentleness uncommon in his time. "There will come a time," he said, "when three words uttered with charity and meekness shall receive a far more blessed reward than three thousand volumes written with disdainful sharpness of wit." This leads to the old truth that few come into the fold of a church because they see that it is the logical thing to do. More often people are lead by the example of a living model of the faith, one who is humble, and just and kind. Hooker's serenity and breadth is a rare instance in his day, for the question of religious authority continued to become more and more narrow--to meet the rival claims of high Church and Puritain to divine right.

Bacon was of the opinion that the religious fanaticism of the time was driving men into atheism. Speaking of the continuous war in the name of religion he says that thus the religious fly a "flag of a bark of pirates and assassins." The penchant of the common people to argue matters of faith he rigourously condemns,

"as the temporal sword is to be drawn with great circumspection in cases of religion, so it is a monstrous thing to put it into the hands of the common people" (13).

Browne did not want to enter into any disputes about his religion. He wanted not to be called a theologian. He merely wished to express his spiritual life through the medium of writing; to record his reactions to the mystery of life (14). Browne holds to the irenic spirit throughout and thus keeps out of the arena of dispute. "It takes two to make a fight." His tolerant attitude may be judged by his writing, "I could never divide myself from any man upon the difference of an opinion, or be angry with his judgment for not agreeing with me in that from which, perhaps, within a few days, I should dissent myself." Again he says, "No man may justly censure or condemn another; because indeed, no man truly

(13) F. Bacon. Of Unity in Religion, 1612, 38.

(14) This attitude is more typical of the nineteenth century, which produced The Prelude of Wordsworth (1805); Sartor Resartus of Carlyle; In Memoriam, of Tennyson; Apologia Pro Vita Sua of Newman; or of our present day, which produced Stoddard's Rebuilding a Lost Faith; Ronald Knox's Spiritual Aeneid and Lunn's Now I See, 1934.

knows another" (15).

In a passage which shows how well Browne understood his age he gives his reason for steering clear of disputes. "I have no genius to disputes in religion; and have often thought it wisdom to decline them, especially upon a disadvantage, or when the cause of truth might suffer in the weakness of my patronage..... every man is not a proper champion for truth, nor fit to take up the gauntlet in the cause of verity; many, from the ignorance of these maxims, and an inconsiderate zeal unto truth, have too rashly charged the troops of error and remain as trophies unto the enemies of truth; a man may be in as just possession of truth as of a city, and yet be forced to surrender; 'tis therefore far better to enjoy her with peace than to hazard her on a battle" (16). This is a shrewd commentary upon the spirit of the times. The toleration of Browne was

(15) Sir T. Browne. Religio Medici (Everyman Edition, 1906).

Note: References through-out are to pages and sections in this popular edition. The Everyman Edition, edited by Rhys, contains the Religio Medici, Hydriotaphia, Brampton Urns, Garden of Cyrus, and Christian Morals.

(16) Religio Medici, 7.



an especially rare trait in a day marked by such sharp cleavages and conflicts.

I have remarked that through Browne the fantastic character of the age is revealed. Nowhere is this so strikingly revealed as in his attitude toward science. In the Pseudodoxia Epidemica we see the modern world through the eyes of the great figures of the old: Aristotle, Galen, Hippocrates, Pliny, Bartholomew, Albertus Magnus. In giving license for the publication of this work the Justice naively states that this work "transcends vulgar concept, and is adorned with great variety of matter and multiplicity of reading" (17). With learned eyes Browne sees the modern world in relation to these philosophers, and when he studies animals and plants and stars and natural science and treats these subjects with the mild but potent acid of his

(17) John Downname. Browne's Works, License page.  
Note: March the 14th, 1645.

I have perused these Learned Animadversions upon the Common Tenets and Opinions of men in former and the present times, entitled Pseudodoxia Epidemica; and finding them much transcending vulgar concept, and adorned with great variety of matter, and multiplicity of reading; I approve them as very worthy to be printed and published.

John Downname  
In First Edition to Browne's Works.

peculiar skepticism his reflections have the credulity, the lack of method, undisciplined curiosity, and prodigious industry of those past masters he so much revered. This credulity he had condemned in his introduction, but in his writing he, with great gusto, is just as credulous as anyone possibly could be. He deplored the endless circle of scholastic debate; yet he, unable to prove a point with scientific accuracy, is prone to win his case with the aid of metaphysics. He had pointed out the stultifying effect of adherence to authority, yet in many of the vulgar errors he cites as proof the word of Aristotle or Pliny, sure that such a weighty name should prove his case.

Sometimes his abstruseness makes him forget what common sense might readily demonstrate. His patristic reverence for authority and the mandates handed down in manuscript is such that natural science, which is most adapted for original research and experiment, became sometimes for him a matter of research in a library, of citing and weighing authorities. This from a man who had curiosity enough to watch over plants very carefully to analyze their processes of growth. He simply could not shake off the idea that the past must be venerated--and venerated where the right to be

dictator was small. Something which might by diligence been experimentally found to have been but a species of bird, through reference to Sextius, Galen, Pliny, and Nicander, is compounded into what we suspect is a literary myth, a true "what-you-may-call-it."

The most famous example of this attitude toward investigation is the case of the badger. The current legend was to the effect that this animal had longer legs on the left side than on the right. If Browne had not leanings himself to the left or medieval side he could have had a man trap a badger and scotch the superstition definitely. As is usual, however, he prefers to cite authorities and evolve arguments on paper. "Albertus Magnus speaks dubiously, confessing he could not confirm the verity hereof; but Aldrovandus plainly affirmeth there can be not such inequality observed; and for my own part, upon indifferent enquiry, I cannot discover this difference.....Again it seems no easy affront unto reason, and generally repugnant unto the course of nature; for, if we survey the total set of animals, we may, in their legs, or organs of progression, observe an equality of length, and parity

of numeration" (18). Browne's scientific (if we may use the term) world was still a wonderland, a strange mixture of fancy and fable, the product of many years of patient thought, reading, observation, and experiment; a wealth of wit, humour, and curious learning. Though Copernicus, Galileo, and Descartes are mentioned they are not "old" enough to have the unqualified respect which Browne has for the Ptolemaic astronomy and the cosmogony of Moses. His attitude was that these new men of science were merely supplementing ancient knowledge; he was the type that would never think of turning his back on the old. Rather, his reverence for the old increased, undisturbed by these revolutions and evolution to new things. The Royal Society professed to scorn the old and superstitious and advocated throwing aside all not proved true by methodology....but their early publications show that they were shackled almost as much as Browne to tradition (19).

Some such movement as the Royal Society was inevitable. Nothing gives a better idea of the state of popular science than to note some of the errors which Browne was trying to combat: "That crystal is nothing

(18) Pseudodoxia Epidemica, 178.

(19) Thomas Sprat. Transactions of the Royal Society, Vols. I and II.

else but ice strongly congealed....that a diamond is softened or broken by the blood of a goat; that an elephant hath no joints; that a wolf, first seeing a man, begets a dumbness in him; that the flesh of a peacock corrupteth not" (20). Such were the traditions and beliefs in general acceptance. It is no wonder that the Royal Society took as firm a ground as possible in its attempt to combat error.

A scholastic training such as Browne possessed is reluctant to admit changes. The field of knowledge he believed covered by the philosophers to a great extent. "The field of knowledge," he wrote in 1658, "hath been so traced, it is hard to spring anything new. Of old things we write something new; since the ancients knew the late anatomical discoveries, and Hippocrates the circulation." Browne, embracing as he did most of the book learning then available, was able to give credit for anything new to someone in the past, however remote the connection might in reality be. As evidence of this book learning we might consider a selection of books from the library of Sir Thomas.

The books in the library of Sir Thomas Browne

(20) Pseudodoxia Epidemica, passim.

indicate the range of his reading in scholasticism and his relationship to medievalism (21). The more important are:

St. Augustine's <u>Confessions with Notes</u>	1550 Lond.
<u>Eikon Basilike</u> (John Gauden) (22)	1648 Lond.
Thomas A. Kempis (23), <u>Following of Christ</u>	1620 Lond.
Henry More, <u>Immortality of the Soul</u>	1659 Lond.
St. Augustine, <u>On the City of God</u>	1630
Vine Maria d. S. Caterina de Siena Viaggio al lad Orient Sic	1672 Rome
R. Descartes, <u>Les Passions de l'ame</u>	1650 Amst.
Tho. Mori, <u>Utopia a Mendis Vindicata</u>	1629 Amst.
<u>Theologia Platonica de Immortalitate</u>	1559 Paris
Bellarmino, <u>De Ascensio Mentis in Deum</u>	1615 Tulli
<u>Clementis Alexandr Opera</u>	1629 Paris
<u>S. Dionysii Areopag Opera</u>	1644 Paris
<u>Origenis Opera</u>	1571

(21) "The Catalogue of the Libraries of the learned Sir Thomas Browne and Dr. Edward Browne, his son, late President of the Royal College of Physicians" was printed by Thomas Ballata, Bookseller, at the Rising Sun in Little Britain. The catalogue gives the date and place where each book was printed. The list is reprinted in Appendix III of Sencourt's Outflying Philosophy. The list I give here is selected from that appendix.

(22) Legouis and Cazamian, History of English Literature, 548.

(23) See page 40 ff.

Tertulliani Opera

1617

S. Ambrosii

1586 Paris

S. Tho. Aquinatis, Summa Theologica (24)

1638 Paris

The auction sale of the library in 1711 lists the library as the property of father and son but from the dates and place where each book was printed we may infer that the father acquired most of the books which appeared before his son grew up. Further, the father was the one more interested in religion. The books on religion written by Sir Thomas show a knowledge of scriptural writing. We may suppose that a scholar like Sir Thomas would not procure books only for ornament, especially when he was of such a curious nature and so eager to know.

The library probably helped to form Browne's taste for authority. It indicated that he had a wide range of reading in philosophy and religion. Few of the prominent philosophical writers of note, renowned interpreters of Catholic faith, and scholars in scripture are missing from this list. Here is shown one strong reason for Browne's dependence upon the past.

Although Browne had this dependence upon the past he lived the life of a medical man and had the characteristic Renaissance interest in the world. He did not have the spirit of revolt against authority and institutions which was also a characteristic of the age but he equalized this by a more intense curiosity in the things of life about him. He had an eagerness, more significant in his son, to keep abreast of scientific discovery. But like most men he failed to see the revolutionary significance of the changes that were going on about him. When he could not see the importance of the new things he was prone to relegate all to the "vain desires" of men. Turning his back to the vanities of the world he took refuge in mysticism; acknowledging that only faith was the true thing in life; that all knowledge is vanity; "I love to lose myself in a mystery, to pursue my reason to an O Altitudo!" (25) He felt, in these moments, that all this digging up of scientific fact was the greatest waste; that what was found would find little application, was to a measure futile. In such traits he again embodies the typical limitations of the century. To us



looking back the trend of the century toward modernism and rationalism is marked, but few caught in the stream could see for the rush and twist of the current. The turnings and meanderings of that current are exemplified in the subtle and evanescent manner in which Browne's thought is conveyed in his writings. The precise nature of this weaving of Browne, the web and woof of antique speculation and modern science and romantic mysticism, which unites the various coloured threads which made up the chequered stuff of the society of his day, is that which has attracted many of us to the reading of his works.

The prejudice and ingenuousness of Browne was not limited to the Doctor. Bacon had a good share of prejudice and ignorance in his works. Lord Herbert of Cherbury wrote a treatise to prove that miracles were irrational and then prayed on his knees for a sign from heaven whether he should publish it. The same Kenelm Digby (26) who wrote on the Religio Medici and attempted to take the work apart a few hours after a first reading; although a member of the Royal Society, was advertising a powder which cured from a distance. This same Royal

(26) Kenelm Digby. Observations Upon Religio Medici Occasionally Written by Sir Kenelm Digby, Knight, 1659.

Society, a society which "took nothing for granted" was backing a research as to "whether diamonds and other precious stones grow again after three or four years in the same place where they have been dug out." Even staid Puritanical parliament was not exempt from what at this day seem strange orders. They sent the astrologers Lilly and Booker to attend the army at Colchester, "to encourage the soldiers with predictions of speedy victory." This latter, of course, may have merely been an astute psychological move. When we consider the background and the current history of the time we take a far more lenient attitude toward any eccentricities which we might find in the man we are considering.

Science, we readily see, was finding the path to dehumanization a thorny one. Picturesqueness of conception of the nature of physical forces was hard to combat. Like some people of the present day who must have their "ghosts" the people liked to conceive of nature as controlled by magic, alchemy, and astrology. The elaborate systems which so interested Chaucer had retained much of vigor and influence. The medicine man was still "grounded in astronomye...

magyk natureel...and olde Esculapius" (27). Only the most enlightened had abandoned their traditional dependence upon astrology, and there was no great gap between the medical practitioner and the herbalist and distiller. The rigid prohibition of the law against dissection of the human body was still in force. Without such dissection the state of knowledge of the human body could gain little upon the knowledge held by the Greeks. The dialectic which had for so long answered for science still held sway; men were scarcely ready to study nature directly. This is but another indication that the period was one of transition.

The physical universe was being treated in a methodical way. In the realm of mathematical physics thinkers were establishing laws upon which discoveries would be based. Philosophy was being treated to the skepticism of Descartes and Hobbes was being read in England. Under the tendencies of open philosophical thought and scientific experiment the reign of natural order was being recognized. This was what St. Simon has termed a "critical period; a period of criticism

(27) Chaucer, Canterbury Tales, Prologue.

and negation, in which mankind lost its old convictions without gaining new ones, of a general or authoritative character." In this period of disintegration the men who lived in it, only half aware of its tendencies, and having no knowledge that such periods are part of the cycle of man's history, found their age baffling.

The mind of Sir Thomas Browne, striving to comprehend this amazing world, reflects the spirit of the age and through its spectroscopic illumination sheds light on many of the problems of the age. We see in him the combination of tradition of the ages in conflict with new ideas. The man is a mixture of Greek, Latin, and Christian philosophies compounded with a passion for research, gleams of a new methodology, and points of discovery pointing to a future full of hope for advancement. The discipline of scientific thought was new and its want produced moments of skepticism. He said this about control of reason: "Let thy studies be free as thy thoughts and contemplation; join sense unto reason, and experiment unto reason" (28).

(28) Christian Morals, Part II, section five.

But for the brief quotation of the O Altitudo we have kept our discussion fairly limited to the realm of science. We now pass on to a phase in which we see the true genius of Browne. In matters in which he could dream Browne possessed a calm serenity which is the constant envy of many of us. He looked into the world beyond science, beyond the limitations of intellect. He carried to this world his distrust of the data of the senses and an unshakeable faith in the validity of ideas. All books which I have seen treating of Browne agree that Browne was distinguished not for denial but for affirmation. Like a poet, a prophet, or a seer, he shaped a creative interpretation of life. The accidental circumstances of his life have him a student, a doctor of medicine; he attained fame as a prose artist; but to those who study him intimately he was the man, partly mystic, who held communion with his God and saw in nature manifestations but building up his faith.

The things in nature which his curiosity dug into and could not explain became but another mystery which he accepted as part of God's plan. In the littlest things, in the things which captivated a

Burns, he found stimulation to dream of "prodigies." Such imaginative flights started by the common things which the ordinary man reacts not to, are a characteristic reaction of genius. A Shakespeare can ennoble the trivial; a Milton bring grandeur to what is to the rabble commonplace. The Renaissance looked with wonder upon a world which had sped by most common folk (as it speeds by most of us today with greater speed) and in spite of the fact that "progress" was even at this early time a watchword, paused to realize some of the beauties of the world about them.

The world was quite fanciful to Browne. He saw with eyes which took an unique view. As Coleridge puts it, "he reads nature neither by sun, moon, nor candle light, but by light of the faery glory around his own head" (29). We must qualify this somewhat, for the man who wrote a dissertation on the Quincunx, as the very theme implies, had an element of practicality and hardheadedness in the way he saw things.

When we speak of practicality we come upon a

(29) S. T. Coleridge, "Character of Sir Thomas Browne as a Writer".  
Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, 1820.

paradox. Browne, in a world alert to political significances, paid no attention apparently to that phase of life. It was perhaps best that he ignored the political situation, for his views were not always orthodox. He remained aloof from anything controversial in the political and social, as well as the religious life about him. Although he was engaged in philosophical thought he kept hands off any controversy in this field also. We have noted his fondness for names of antiquity, perhaps the fact that he attached little weight to current speculation kept him from the battle-ground of controversy centering around Hobbes and Descartes. We would almost, if we did not know of his active life, suspect Browne of being a hermit or a recluse--as far as he noticed the discussions on politics and philosophy going on around him.

The fact that Browne worked in seclusion as far as his scientific work is concerned is again typical of his day and age. Bacon chose to ignore Galileo and Copernicus, although he wished for a complete unification of knowledge. There was no coordinating or binding principle of science. All men worked singly and appeared to distrust the results of others.

This we believe to be a fact, in spite of the attempt at union made by the Royal Society. We spoke of the stream of progress. May we use an old adage and say that each man was "paddling his own canoe?"

I have stated that Browne was inclined to be somewhat unorthodox. In his Religio Medici he allies himself definitely with a religious party and defends warmly (some thought rashly) his beliefs. He was no mere dreamer but could back up his beliefs with arguments--but I go into matter which I should properly reserve to later pages.

We may have painted Browne as a narrow man in delineating him from the scientific and philosophical angle. He was far from being narrow. His open outlook on the things of the world was not confined to the inanimate. His letters show that he was acquainted with many of the eminent men of the day. His travel and broad education had given him a balance and perspective. He brought around himself a group of students whom he inspired with his love of learning. He followed with interest the affairs of the Royal Society which could not admit him as a member. He wrote papers for this society. His letters to his son Edward show him



as interested in his family and anxious for their betterment. These facts have not been as necessary as the scientific and philosophical for we shall not be so much concerned with them in this study. The life of Browne presents a fascinating study, but has been so well covered that it would serve no purpose to dwell upon it. We shall judge him, moreover, as a man who lived not in the world of men and affairs but in the world of thought.

Browne summed up fairly well his age in a reference to what the urn (the symbol of the world) held: "Time hath endless rarities, and shows of all varities; which reveals old things in heaven, makes new discoveries in earth" (30). This man Browne was not just an antiquary obsessed with urns (though his name does for most connote that one thing) -- nor was he merely a writer of quaint passages, prose meditations. He proved by his dissertations that his was a life active not only in scientific inquiry, medicinal research, and the like, but in philosophic thought.

When we take leave of the background of the

(30) S. T. Browne, Hydriotaphia, 103.

seventeenth century and its influence upon Browne and consider specifically his work, we come immediately upon the theme of immortality, "Death as the most interesting fact in life."

Browne meditates much about eternity and the problem of immortality. His Hydriotaphia discusses many phases of the subject. Above these poor jars of human dust rose the mysterious powers of life and love and death, rose time, the shadow and the deep illumination of Eternity. The dominant tone is sombre and grave and richly melancholy. Mortality is his constant occupation and by far his most powerful imaginative stimulus.

The history of the publication of Urn Burial shows that Browne was regarded as a religious philosopher of some note. We are familiar with the fact that Browne had to publish the work because it had received such wide circulation in manuscript form. Upon publication the work was translated into many languages, always with comments by eminent men. The work received favorable mention for many years by scholars. This may have been due to the fact that Browne had attended so many schools and was thus acquainted with so many scholars.

Even without these accidental characteristics the work possesses a moral and intellectual vigor which stamps it as one of the better books among those dealing with religion in the seventeenth century. It is still one of the most widely read.

I have pointed out the methods of religious controversy of the age of Browne. Here was a book different from the mass. The book was an humble searching after the truth of things. It occupied itself not with the "right" and "wrong" of things but instituted a leisurely and rambling search among the problems of life and death, and life after death.

Urn Burial is a sustained and majestic meditation on the vanity of life, and the corresponding value of pointing our lives to man's ultimate purpose. In Browne's first published line the problem comes to the front, "Certainly that man were greedy of life, who should desire to live when all the world were at an end." The subject has a natural dignity and stateliness; through the genius of Browne the subject flames into intensity.

As the Norwich Doctor went about his work he saw death all about him. When people complained about the fact of death Browne, thinking of how easily diseases

spread and of the frailty of the human body commented; "We are beholden to everyone we meet, he doth not kill us." Not that Browne liked very much the idea of death. At one time he said, "O Adam, quid fecisti" (31); later he was willing to forgive Adam, and "like the best of them, to die." At one point we even see a note perhaps of bravado (strange in Sir Thomas) when the doctor tells us that his body was "as wholesome a morsel for the worms as any" (32).

The subjects of death and immortality not only suited Browne's temperament but were favorite topics of the day as well. At this time literature was affected by the inbred love of Gothic magnificence and pomp on the one hand and the revival of Stoic simplicity on the other (33). The themes of death and the vanity of fame were quite suitable for such public readings of magniloquent poetry and rhetorically magnificent funeral sermons as were then the fashion. Famous for treatment of such themes are Donne, Drummond, Bacon, Taylor, and Browne (34).

(31) Religio Medici, 43.

(32) Ibid., 45.

(33) Croll: "Attic Prose in the Seventeenth Century." Studies in Philology, XVIII (1921).

(34) cf. Drummond, Cypresse Grove; Taylor, Holy Dying; Donne, Sermons; Bacon, Vicissitude of Things.

These men saw the true nature of death and all tried to combat the general attitude toward it. Drummond is nearer to the style and philosophical outlook of Browne than any other writer of the period. The main arguments of Cypresse Grove are quite close to those in Urn Burial. They are the following: Death is chiefly fearful because of the trappings and pomp with which it is surrounded. Yet it is a part of nature and should be considered as but a natural and common event. Others are coming to see the wonders of the world, therefore we must clear the way and give them room. If you complain that there will come a time when you will no longer be, why not repine because there was once a time when you were not? All of the so-called "wonders" of the world will perish just like you. "Man's life is as a ball tossed in the tinnise court of the world." The least thing kills man, "we should rather wonder how so fragill a matter should so long endure, than how so soon dissolve and decay." (This last line is almost word-for-word the expression of Browne). Sleep is a kind of death releasing the soul for a time. Eternal life would be unendurable. Death is fearful because "that is terrible which is unknown, so doe little

children feare to goe in the dark, and their fear is increased by tales." One year is enough to see all life, for "days are not to be esteemed after the number of them, but after the goodness, and the musician who makes the sweetest melody, not the one that plays the longest, is most praiseworthy." The soul rises to God. Death is but a "short, nay, sweete sigh" compared to the smallest dram of the infinite felicities of heaven. Speaking again of the trappings of death Drummond said, "I have often thought that the marble colors of obsequies, weeping, and funeral pompe (with which we ourselves limne it forth) do add much more ghastliness to it than otherwise it hath" (35). Drummond is quite typical of his confreres for he borrows heavily from all of them.

Bacon wrote two essays on death. In one he says, "Groans and convulsions, and a discolored face, and friends weeping, and blacks and obsequies, and the like show death terrible" (36). The idea of comparing fear of death to the fear of children concerning the dark was probably his idea, for his essays appeared

{35} Drummond, Cypresse Grove, 1, 105 ff.

{36} Bacon, Vicissitude of Things, 89.

some twenty years before the work of Drummond to which I referred. In one section of his work Taylor expresses a similar idea (37). "Take away but the pomps of death, the disguises and solemn bugbears, the tinsel and the actings by candle-light, and proper and fantastic ceremonies, the minstrels and the noisemakers, the women and the weepers, the swoonings and the shriekings, the nurses and the Physicians, the dark room and the ministers, the kindred and the watchers; and then to die is easy, ready and quitted from its troublesome circumstances." How close this is to the words of Browne, "I wish that I might die unseen, unpitied, without wondering eyes, tears of pity, lectures of mortality, and none had said, Quantum mutatus ab illo" (38).

The Urn Burial (39) tells of the ceremonials of death and interment of all nations and shows how all hoped for some form of a "happy-hunting-ground." This heaven has varied much, depending upon the tastes and

(37) Taylor, Cypresse Grove, 1, 150.

(38) S. T. Browne, Religio Medici, 45.

(39) Urn Burial: the references throughout are to Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial; or, a Discourse, of the Sepulchral Urnes lately found in Norfolk. Brampton Urns, also by Browne, is of little value.

education of the people. Most rituals consoled with the hope of immortality. The recumbent posture pleaded that the dead were but sleeping; the music of the funeral chant gave a secret and symbolical hint that "the soul had departed to enjoy the primitive harmony whence it had first descended."

Browne's attitude differs from the Aristot-  
lian idea that men may continue their lives in their  
posterity and it differs from the idea of Horace,  
who was so "certain" that his writings would endure  
longer than bronze; Browne puts his trust in the  
goodness of God; he finds religion the only reconcilia-  
tion of the grave. For the Norwich doctor family,  
fame, and memory will fail as the pyramids finally  
do when the fulness of the love of Christ in heaven  
embraces the soul of man. To Browne the destiny of  
man was an eternity of ecstasy. Hearts faltering  
before the sorrow of loneliness should be consoled by  
the knowledge that there is a Christ waiting. Only  
through such meditations does death lose its sting  
and the grave its victory. The only poem of Browne's  
which has much merit deals with this subject and ends  
thus:



Sleep is a death; O make me try,  
By sleeping what it is to die;  
And as gently lay my head  
Upon my grave, as now my bed.  
Howere I rest, great God, let me  
Awake again at last with thee;  
And thus assur'd, behold I lie  
Securely, or to wake or die.  
These are my drowsie days; in vain  
I do now wake to sleep again;  
O come that hour, when I shall never  
Sleep again, but wake for ever.

"This is the dormative I take to bedward; I need no other Laudanum than this to make me sleep; after which I close mine eyes in security, content to take my leave of the Sun, and sleep unto the Resurrection" (40).

Christian Morals has an unique comparison of two deaths which is thought-provoking: "There is but one who died salvifically for us and able to say unto death, hitherto thou shalt go and no farther; only one enlivening death, which makes gardens of graves, and that which was sowed in corruption to arise and flourish in glory; when death itself shall die and living shall have no period; when the damned shall mourn at the funeral of death; when life not death shall be the wages of sin; when the second death shall prove a miserable life and destruction shall be courted."

This theme of death which so engaged the seventeenth century is found through-out the writings of Browne. For expression of this theme in which subject matter is wedded to form the Urn Burial is perhaps the finest example in the seventeenth century. The sonorous rhythms and magnificent periods are calculated to make a perfect funeral garland. "Now since these dead bones have already outlasted the living ones of Methuselah, and in a yard under ground, and thin walls of clay, outworn all the strong and specious buildings above it; and quietly rested under the drums and tramplings of three conquests; what prince can promise such diuturnity unto his relics? Time, which antiquates antiquity, and hath an art to make dust of all things, hath yet spared these minor monuments" (41).

We have seen how popular the theme of death was in the seventeenth century. As Browne followed the current line of thought on this subject it would be well to see how he was influenced by his contemporaries in other matters.

Descartes was a contemporary of Browne and

was noted for reforms in scientific philosophy. Mr. Gosse chooses to find in the writings of Browne "much that is curiously in common with Descartes" (42). This he says in spite of the fact that he later says that Browne was ignorant of his contemporaries' reforms in philosophy. Browne subdues the scientific facts presented to him to religion and imagination. Gosse wonders what would have been the effect on Browne if he had been influenced by Descartes. This, although an imaginary hypothesis for Gosse, is actually a fact. Browne knew Descartes and his philosophy (43). In spite of the fact that Gosse says, "Browne never once makes mention in any portion of his writing to Descartes", we find his name mentioned twice in the second book of the Pseudodoxia Epidemica. Like other men of multifarious learning, Gosse received some notions without examination. Like others, Mr. Gosse skipped through the Pseudodoxia discursively. If, then, Browne was acquainted with

{42} E. Gosse, Sir Thomas Browne, 38 ff.

{43} In the library of Browne the following books of Descartes were found: Les Passions de l'aime, Method for the Well-Guiding of Reason, Discours sur la Methode.

Descartes, how did this philosophy affect him? When Descartes finds an argument for God's existence in the human concepts of perfection Browne follows him. But when Descartes evolves theories of rationalism we find Browne far away, preferring to lose his reason in mystical authority. Browne says, "Within the compass of myself I find the battle of Lepanto, Passion against reason, reason against faith, faith against the devil, and my conscience against all" (44). We have noted his distaste for controversies. This is backed up by cogent reflections in the Religio, "In all disputes, so much as there is of passion, so much as there is of nothing to the purpose; for then reason, like a bad hound, spends upon a false scent, and for sakes the question first started. And this is one reason why controversies are never determined; for, though they are amply proposed, they are scarce at all handled, they do so swell with unnecessary digressions; and the parenthesis on the party is often as large as the main discourse on the subject" (45).

{44} Religio Medici, 12.

{45} Ibid, 79.

When we trace Browne's allegiance to medievalism we do not wish to imply that Browne's religion was a complicated maze of philosophy. His faith was simple. That is what attracted readers to a Newman as well as a Browne. A really naive personality is a strange thing in the world. In speaking of heaven Browne says, "It is (I protest) beyond my ambition to aspire unto the first ranks; my desires onely are (and I shall be happy therein) to be but the last man, and bring up the Rere in Heaven" (46). Browne acknowledged, in the opening chapter of the Religio Medici, his debt of "general charity" to the public. His avowal of general charity found counterpart in the way in which he lived. He was devoted, as I have indicated, to his home and family. His life in relation to his associates was pervaded by charity. The airy subtleties of religion which find their way into passages of Browne are matched by his simple goodness of life.

This love of God was one of the things which was a favorite meditation of Browne. Another was the incomprehensibleness and the mystery of God. "God hath

not made a creature that can comprehend him" (47). This faith in God outweighed his curiosity concerning the things of God, "Yet do I believe that all this is true, which indeed my reason would persuade me to be false; and this I think is no vulgar part of faith, to believe a thing not only above but contrary to reason, and against the arguments of our Proper senses" (48). The physician believed that love was better than to know all mysteries and all knowledge. Of knowledge Browne said, "There is yet another conceit that hath sometimes made me shut my books, which tells me it is a vanity to waste our days in the blind pursuit of knowledge; it is but attending a little longer, and we shall enjoy that by instinct and infusion, which we endeavor at here by labour and inquisition. It is better to sit down in a modest ignorance, and rest contented with the natural blessings of our own reasons, than buy the uncertain knowledge of this life with sweat and vexation, which death gives every fool gratis, and is an accessory

(47) Religio Medici, 14.

(48) Ibid, 10.

of our glorification" (49).

Browne's inquisitive spirit he justified because he considered that a mind really loving God would turn to examine and observe anything bearing a revelation of the beloved. "The wisdom of God receives small honour from those vulgar heads that rudely stare about and with a gross rusticity admire his works. Those highly magnify him, whose judicious enquiry into his acts, and deliberate research into his creatures, return the duty of a devout and learned admiration" (50). To the lover of the Divine, scientific observation becomes a religious duty. He did not envy those who knew more than himself, "but pitied them that know less;" in the field of scientific knowledge he advanced knowledge, and was happy to think that he had done so. "It is an honourable object to see the reasons of other men wear our liveries, and their borrowed understandings do homage to the bounty of ours; it is the cheapest way of beneficence, and, like the natural charity of the sun, illuminates another

{49} Christian Morals, 246.

{50} Religio Medici, 64.

without obscuring itself. To be reserved and caitiff in this part of goodness, is the sordidest piece of covetousness, and more contemptible than pecuniary avarice. To this (as calling myself a scholar), I am obliged by the duty of my condition; I make not therefore my head a grave, but a treasure, of knowledge; I intend no monopoly, but a community, in learning; I study not for my own sake only, but for theirs that study not for themselves" (51). We see then, whether or no Browne made a specific daily offering of his work, he did have in mind, throughout its commission, the honouring of God.

Browne's view of the universe was limited in two ways. First, he believed that the study of nature lead to the higher magnification of God. Secondly, he believed that the infallibility of God could be relied upon as final judge in any seeming conflict.

Pseudodoxia Epidemica starts with the assertion that all error is traceable to Satan. This is but logical reasoning from the first postulate.

(51) Religio Medici, 69.



The primal truth of nature confirms the existence of God. This fact needed not the weight of Descartes' insistence for further proof. Browne collected his divinity not only from the Bible but from "the universal and public manuscript of nature" (52). By combating error Browne was furthering, of course, the interests of science and clearing the ground for the advancement of learning, but to find divinity in the things of nature was the more important aim.

Browne believed that "the universal and public manuscript of nature" was just as good a place as the Bible to read of the things of God for "nature is in the first place the art of God" (53). Because nature was such an art the description of it "must not vary from the verity of the example or describe things otherwise than they truly are, or have been. For hereby introducing false ideas of things it perverts and deforms the face and symmetry of truth" (54).

When Browne saw what appeared to be conflict between the truths of revelation and science he judged

(52) Religio Medici, 17.

(53) Ibid, 19.

(54) Ibid, 19.

science to be somehow misrepresented or a mistake to have been made through careless observation. When in this manner confounded Browne attributed the fact to the fact that God's works are wonderful and not easily to be comprehended or explained by the puny intellect of man. Where thinking out a problem failed Browne quit questioning and turned direct to truth; he put intellect to sleep, and thereby left his soul free. "To prie into the maze of His Counsels is not only folly in man, but presumption even in angels....I love to lose myself in a mystery" (55). Browne adopted that odd resolution of Tertullian Certum est, quia impossibile est. (56)

Thus far we have seen Browne's attitude toward the problems of life, death, immortality, and the mystery of God. We have investigated Browne's treatment of various problems, showing his relationship to his contemporaries. We have shown the slight influence of the thought of the time upon him. We have described the library of Browne and thus suggested his debt to medievalism. By selecting two books from this

(55) Religio Medici, 10.

(56) Ibid., 11.

library and comparison of these works to Browne's  
Religio Medici and Christian Morals we hope to show  
a definite relationship on the part of Sir Thomas Browne  
to scholasticism.

### Chapter III

#### BROWNE'S RELATIONSHIP TO SCHOLASTICISM

The history of England until the time of the Reformation shows us many persons in whom "Catholic faith and national feeling are fused in a single flame" (57). The English Way (58) studies English sanctity from St. Bede to Newman and shows that while at the period of the Reformation religious life ceased to flow in the same full stream something essentially the Catholic Way has remained the same. The Reformation altered slightly, but was far from destroying, the intellectual influence of the church in England. Miss Ramsay says: "Sa generation doit encore ses pensées plus profondes à l'époque antérieure" (59).

At the beginning of the seventeenth century theology was a general and comprehensive system of human as well as divine philosophy. The Bible had been interpreted to explain philosophy by St. Thomas Aquinas and the Sacred Scriptures had been applied with unmatched deftness to meet the wants and soul-

(57) Christopher Dawson, "William Langland", in The English Way, 160.

(58) Ward, ed., The English Way (1933).

(59) Ramsay, Doctrines Médiévales, 72.

yearnings of humanity by Thomas a Kempis. For those who were interested in the formal and recondite the Summa Theologica was supreme; for those who wanted a more simple explanation, A Kempis, the commentator paramount, opened the meaning of the sacred text. Together their works were a basis for a philosophy of life. True religion and sound learning were regarded as ideals by both the religious and lay scholars. Theology interested all educated laymen as it had in the past. The thinkers still worked in the old terms and continued to base their knowledge upon scholastic philosophy.

We shall attempt in the following pages to point out in what manner Sir Thomas Browne followed the writers of the Medieval Church. For this purpose we shall mainly consider the Summa Theologica, which was still the sum of philosophy, and The Imitation of Christ, which showed the way of life. Both of these works are saturated throughout with the Sacred Scriptures, and so what we find in Sir Thomas Browne to be related to these works may have been found originally by him in the primary source. St. Thomas and A Kempis both drank deep at the fountain of spiritual beauty and truth which is the Bible until

much of that beauty and truth became a part of their mind and spirit.

Sir Thomas Browne did not think himself far from the Catholic tradition. Speaking of the Anglican and Catholic churches he said, "there is one faith and necessary body of principles common to us both" (60).

The works of Sir Thomas Browne in which we find his medievalism most apparent are his Religio Medici and his Christian Morals. The first was the work of the youthful Browne, age thirty; the latter was from the matured, the aged Browne. Written about 1635 the Religio Medici was copied again and again in manuscript. There still exist some half-dozen of such copies. One of these, getting into the hands of a printer, Crooke, was published in 1642. The numerous errors caused Browne to take the printing into his own hands and in 1643 he issued "a true and full copy of that which was most imperfectly and surreptitiously printed before" (61). The Religio Medici was translated into Latin by John Merryweather in 1644 and

(60) Religio Medici, 4.

(61) Religio Medici. Introduction to first authorized edition.

achieved a continental reputation extremely uncommon in those days in the case of a work of an English author. The history of the publication of the work shows that Browne was regarded as a religious philosopher of some note. The work was translated into many foreign languages, always with the notices of famous men of learning. The fact that so many scholars were interested in the work may be due to the fact that Browne's traveling in quest of learning had taken him to many higher institutions of learning, where he had no doubt made many friends.

The book's combination of theology and physics also suited the bent of the time, and the peculiarity of the mental attitude was of wide appeal. The work possessed a moral and intellectual vigor which stamped it as one of the better books among those on religious topics.

We see many moods reflected in the Religio Medici. That is the natural result of so personal a narrative. We encounter orthodox submission, mystical flights, a dash of skepticism, scientific and philosophical arguments, world-weariness, confidence in the goodness of God, and curiosity about the mysteries of

life and death. To readers of Browne in this age the maze rather fascinates; to some of his own morbidly troubled and militant generation this complexity was unpleasing. The work lacked sharp distinctions in matters of religion. In searching humbly for truth it divagated from the main current of the day. In such an age as I have described, where "right" and "wrong" were sharply distinguished, an age which expressed itself in "action", such a leisurely and rambling search was a bit against the grain--for when people didn't know exactly where you stood they could not call you friend or foe. Browne does call himself a "Christian": "For my religion, though there be several circumstances that might persuade the world I have none at all,--as the general scandal of my profession,--the natural course of my studies, the indifference of my behavior and discourse in matters of religion, (neither violently defending one, nor with that common ardour and contention opposing another), yet in despite thereof, I dare without usurpation assume the honourable style of a Christian" (62).



The phrase "neither violently defending one, nor with that common ardour and contention opposing another" might be interpreted as a satire on the feverish fanaticism of the day.

The Christian Morals was written just before the death of Browne and was not published until 1716. The book explains Christian ethics and treats of such virtues as humility, chastity, temperance, generosity, simplicity, gratitude, sincerity, self-control, faith, and the like. This sounds almost like a catalogue or table of contents of the Imitation of Christ.

Before going on to a specific discussion of the closeness of Browne's work to the Summa Theologica and the Imitation of Christ, let us consider one work which was also important as background material for some of Browne's Philosophy. In Shakespeare's day the De Proprietatibus Rerum of Bartholomew as translated by Batman (1582) under the title Batman Upon Bartholomew was the popular natural history. We find in this work all the older psychology in quaint form, presented in the terms of the microcosm, under which conception the science of man involved the study of the stars, the planetary signs, the four elements, the four humours, and the three divisions of the soul. The

symbol of the vegetative soul is the triangle, because it has the three powers of self-sustainment, growth, and reproduction; that of the sensitive soul is the square, for various occult reasons, but chiefly because its powers are common sense, imagination, reason, and memory; the rational soul is the perfect circle.

This venerable physiology and psychology, surviving up to our own day in almanacs, was the serious scientific basis of The Faerie Queen, Davies' Nosce te Ipsum, Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy, Bacon's Novum Organum, Fletcher's Purple Island, Paradise Lost, and parts of Religio Medici. The limits of this paper prohibit any discussion of the debt which our writer owes to this work but we must recognize the fact that this work may have influenced deeply the trend of thought in many ways. We shall confine our discussion, however, to specific instances wherein we believe Browne was affected by the Summa and the Imitation.

The idea of God as sustaining power is one of the closest parallels we can draw between Sir Thomas and St. Thomas. As Aquinas has it, God is not only the cause of creatures, but also that which governs and upholds them by the word of his power (63). Browne

(63) Summa Theologica I, 1; XLIV, 2.

says, "As He created all things, so is He beyond and in them all; not only in power as under His subjects, or in His presence as being in his cognition; but in his very essence, as being the soul of their causalities, and the essential cause of their existencies" (64).

"To desire there were no God were plainly to unwish being, which must need be annihilated in the subtraction of that essence which substantially supporteth, and restrains from regression into nothingness." Uniting the idea of cause and subsistence Browne says, "for though we christen effects by their most sensible and nearest causes yet is God the true and infallible cause of all, whose concourse, though it be general, yet doth it subdivide itself into the particular actions of everything, and is that spirit by which each singular essence, not only subsists, but performs its operations (65). This last follows the Summa Theologica: Cum Deus sit prima omnium causa in fieri et esse, necesse est ut omnia etiam ab ipso conserventur."

In the Summa St. Thomas discusses immortality

{64} Religio Medici, II, 55.

{65} Ibid, 82.

and shows that men are dependent creatures, that only God is perfect actuality, all things therefore depending upon Him for existence. Man requires the supporting power of God, for "non sequitur quod aliquid extra Deum sit aeternum" (66). Note how closely Browne follows: "There is nothing strictly immortal but immortality. Whatever hath no beginning may be confident of no end; which is the peculiar of that necessary essence that cannot destroy itself; and the highest strain of omnipotency, to be so powerfully constituted as not to suffer even from the power of itself: all others have a dependent being, and within the reach of destruction" (67).

St. Thomas in the Summa Theologica treats of the union of the divine and human natures in the Person of Christ. The problem of the nature of Christ he further treats in his Summa Contra Gentiles where he discusses the union of the three Persons in the Godhead. In a discussion of friendship Browne includes these two discussions and draws an inference to suit his taste:

{66} Summa Theologica I, 1; X, 3.  
{67} Urn Burial, 137.

"There are three most mystical unions: 1, two natures in one person; 2, three persons in one nature; 3, one soul in two bodies; for though indeed they be really divided, yet they are so united, as they seem but one, and make rather a duality than two distinct souls" (68). Because Browne believed in the mysteries of the Godhead without any definite reasoning upon the question he thought it not amiss to transfer the figure to his own use. Thus he says that he loves his friend as he does virtue, his soul, or his God (69).

In the Summa Theologica St. Thomas writes of the wisdom of God. He shows that His knowledge like His will is not distinct from his substance. The greatest of all perfections in creatures, whose perfection is in God, would be the understanding of God. The intellectual nature is above man's other natures and the act of understanding is the perfect use of the intellectual nature, and the noblest object of the understanding is God. Browne realized his limitations in such a discussion and says, "as the world cannot comprise Him neither can it comprehend His works."

(68) Religio Medici, 74.

(69) Ibid, 74, 75.

Browne goes on to say, "Wisdom is His most beauteous attribute; no man can attain to it, yet Solomon pleased God when he desired it (70). He is wise because He knows all things; and He knoweth all things, because He made them all; but his greatest knowledge is in comprehending that He made not, that is, Himself. And this is the greatest knowledge in man...I know he is wise in all, wonderful in what we conceive, but far more in what we comprehend not." The passage, similar as it is to Aquinas, may be compared even more aptly to a passage in St. Augustine's City of God: "Whereas His wisdom being simply and uniformly manifold can comprehend all incomprehensibility by his incomprehensible comprehension; so that whatsoever thing that is new and unlike to all other he should please to make, it could not be new or strange unto Him nor could he foresee it a little before, but containe it in His eternall prescience" (71).

St. Thomas writes concerning the triple government of three agencies, passion, faith and reason.

(70) Religio Medici, 14.

(71) St. Augustine, City of God, XII, Ch. 18 (see p. 16).

When Browne discusses the same subject he follows the argument throughout and winds up with a characteristic touch: "As Reason is a Rebel unto Faith, so Passion unto Reason: as the propositions of faith seem absurd unto Reason, so the Theorems of Reason unto Passion, and both unto reason. Yet a moderate and peaceable discretion may so state and order the matter, that they may be all kings, and yet make but one monarchy, every one exercising his Sovereignty and Prerogative in a due time and place, according to the restraint and limit of circumstance. There is, in philosophy, so in Divinity, sturdy doubts and boisterous objections, wherewith the unhappiness of our knowledge too nearly acquainteth us. More of these no man hath known than myself, which I confess I conquered, not in a martial posture, but on my knees" (72). This idea is repeated later when Browne says, "Within the compass of myself I find the battle of Lepanto. Passion against Reason, Reason against Faith, Faith against the devil, and my conscience against all" (73).

{72} Religio Medici, 23.

{73} Ibid, 76.

St. Thomas has used the argument of the order and harmony in the world to prove the existence of God (74). The idea of nature as the art of God is a familiar one. The core of Browne's discussion of nature is in the five sections of the Religio Medici from XIV to XVIII (75). The theme of the harmony of nature also occupied one whole book of Browne. In the Garden of Cyrus the idea brought out is that "all things began in order, so shall they end, and so shall they begin again; according to the ordainer of order and mystical mathematics of heaven" (76).

In admiring the works of God, Browne says, "The wisdom of God receives small honor from those vulgar heads that rudely stare about, and with a gross rusticity admire his works; rather do we owe God, the duty of a devout and learned admiration" (77). Browne's feeling for the harmony of the world involves the scientist's appreciation of structural adaptation, but it involves also the temperament of the moral-philosopher, who thinks in terms of intrinsic beauty.

(74) Summa Theologica, I, 1, Q 2, Art. 3, 25.

(75) Religio Medici, 17 ff.

(76) Garden of Cyrus, 229.

(77) Religio Medici, 15.



All that God made was good, Browne insists, and "conformable to his will, which abhors deformity and is the rule of order and beauty." God is the infallible unthwarted workman, whose creation is without flaw, perfect in all its parts, "I hold there is a general beauty in the works of God, and therefore no deformity in any kind or species of creature whatsoever" (78).

In various passages in the Religio Medici Browne gives direct credit to the Schools, that is, to scholastic philosophy. In considering the nature of angels, "'Tis no bad method of the schools, whatsoever perfection we find obscurely in ourselves, in a more compleat and absolute way to ascribe unto them" (79). The explanation of the nature of angels follows closely that of St. Thomas. As human beings know God, and themselves, and one another, so too do the angels, but better as their faculties are superior....they apprehend whatever they know without discursive reasoning; their mode of cognition is in proportion to their superiority. Their perfection is in their nature. The angels know at once all that they can know of things, they have a

(78) Religio Medici, 17.

(79) Ibid, 38.

plenitude of intellectual light. They comprehend not only the whole virtue of whatever they perceive, but also all that can be reasoned about that thing. Consider now how closely Browne follows this argument: "I believe that they (angels) have an extemporary knowledge, and upon the first motion of their reason do what we cannot with study and deliberation; that they know things by their forms, and define by specifical differences what we describe by accidents and properties....If they have that intuitive knowledge whereby as in reflection they behold the thoughts of one another, I cannot peremptorily deny but they know a great part of ours" (80).

St. Thomas shows that by the Incarnation God established a closer union between Himself and man, and through man with the lower creation. Sir Thomas borrows this idea for his Religio: "For we are only that amphibious piece between a corporeal and a spiritual essence, that middle form that links these two together and makes good the method of God and nature, that jumps not from extremes but unites the incompatible distances by some middle and participating natures" (81). When-

(80) Religio Medici, 37.

(81) Ibid, 39.

ever Browne was strolling in the realm of metaphysics he stayed close to the bright star of all philosophers, St. Thomas Aquinas. When Browne came down "out of the clouds" and considered life and the way of life he turned to the simple book which has been such a source of comfort and guide to men, the Imitation of Christ of Thomas A Kempis (82).

The opening chapter strikes the keynote of the Imitation and indicates the appropriateness of the title: "He that followeth me, walketh not in darkness, sayeth the Lord. These are the words of Christ, by which we are taught to imitate His life and manners, if we would be truly enlightened and be delivered from all blindness of heart....Truly, sublime words make not a man holy and just; but a virtuous life maketh him dear to God" (83). Browne has expressed the same idea: "He honours God who imitates Him. For what we virtuously imitate we approve and admire; and since we delight not to imitate inferiors, we aggrandize and magnify those we imitate; since we are most apt to imitate those we love, we

(82) Thomas A Kempis, Imitation of Christ. Brother Leo (ed.) Macmillan Company, 1927.  
References are by Book, chapter and page.

(83) Imitation, Book I, Ch. I, 1,2,.

testify our affection in our imitation of the inimitable. To affect to be like may be no imitation. To act, and not to be what we pretend to imitate, is but a mimical conformation, and carrieth no virtue in it" (84).

We have seen that one of the favorite topics of Browne is that of death. In his consideration of death he follows quite closely the idea of A Kempis concerning the way of life in preparation for death. Browne writes, "Were there any hopes to outlive vice, or a point to be superannuated from sin, it were worthy our knees to implore the days of Methuselah" (85). A Kempis writes, "What availeth it to live long when there is so small amendment in us?" (86) Browne goes on, "But age does not rectify, but incurvate our natures, turning bad dispositions into worser habits, and (like diseases) brings on incurable vices; for every day as we grow weaker in age, we grow stronger in sin, and the number of our days doth but make our sins innumerable" (87). Kempis says, "Alas, length of days doth not always better

(84) Christian Morals, Part III, sec. 2, p. 265.

(85) Religio Medici, 47.

(86) Imitation, Book I, Ch. XXIII, 53.

(87) Religio Medici, 54.

us, but often rather increaseth our sins" (88). Browne further says, "I find my growing judgment daily instructs me how to be better, but my untamed affections and confirmed vitiosity makes me daily do worse" (89). Thomas A Kempis says, "Many there are who reckon years of conversion; and yet full slender often times is the fruit of the amendment. If to die be accounted dreadful, to live long may perhaps prove more dangerous" (90).

Browne's constant reflections upon death carry a tone quite like unto the Imitation. He says, "I find in my confirmed age the same sins I discovered in my youth; I committed many then, because I was a child; and because I commit them still, I am yet an infant. Therefore I perceive that a man may be twice a child, before the days of dotage" (91). "Death is the cure of all diseases. There is no Catholicon or universal remedy I know, but this; which, though nauseous to queasie stomachs, yet to prepared appetites is Nectar, and a pleasant potion of immortality" (92). There are two

(88) Imitation, Book I, Ch. 23, p. 54.

(89) Religio Medici, 47.

(90) Imitation, Book I, Ch. 24, p. 54.

(91) Religio Medici, 47.

(92) Ibid, 81.

kinds of death worthwhile, "dying unto sin and the world" (93). "And in these moral acceptions, the way to be immortal is to die daily" (94). Browne further advises man: "Measure not thyself by thy morning shadow, but by the extent of thy grave, and reckon thyself above the earth by the line thou must be contented with under it" (95). "To learn to die is better than to study the ways of dying" (96).

In A Kempis' Meditations on Death he says: "Very quickly there will be an end of thee here; see therefore to thy state. Today man is; tomorrow he is gone. And when he is out of sight, quickly also is he out of mind. Oh, the stupidity and hardness of man's heart, which thinketh only upon the present and doth not rather regard what is to come! Thou oughtest so to order thyself in all thy thoughts as if today thou wert to die. If thou hadst a good conscience, thou wouldst not greatly fear death. Oh, how wise and happy is he that now laboreth to be such a one in his life as he will desire to be found at the hour of death! A perfect

(93) Religio Medici, 50.

(94) Ibid, 51.

(95) Christian Morals, 241.

(96) Ibid, 263.

contempt of the world, a fervent desire to go forward in all virtue, a love of discipline, a laborious repentance, a ready obedience, a denying of ourselves and an endurance of any affliction whatsoever for the love of Christ, will give us great confidence that we shall die happily" (97).

Somewhat akin to this subject is the idea of doing good works while one is able. As Sir Thomas has it: "Be temperate and Sober, not to preserve your body in an ability for wanton ends, nor to avoid the infamy of common transgressors that way, and thereby to hope to expiate or palliate obscure or closer vices, not to spare your purse, nor simply to enjoy health; but in one word that thereby you may truly serve God, which every sickness will tell you you cannot well do without health. The sick man's sacrifice is but a lame oblation. Pious treasures, lay'd up in healthful days, plead for sick non-performances; without which we must needs look back with anxiety upon the lost opportunities of health" (98). A Kempis says: "Whilst thou art in health thou mayest do much good; but when thou art sick, I see not

{97} Imitation, Book I, Ch. XXIII, 1,3,4.

{98} Christian Morals, Book I, sec. 4.

what thou wilt be able to do. Few are improved by sickness....Time now is very precious; now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation...the time will come when thou shalt desire one day or hour to amend in, and I know not that it will be granted thee... Learn now to die to the world, that thou mayest then begin to live with Christ" (99).

A Kempis has a chapter on "Having a humble opinion of ourselves." Such ideas as "whoso knoweth himself is lowly in his own eyes and delighteth not in the praises of men" teach that man will only be happy when he learns contempt of all worldly vanities. "Many things there are to know which little or nothing profit the soul; and he is very unwise who minds other things more than those that tend to his salvation" (100). Browne also advises us: "Look humbly upon thy virtues, and though thou art rich in some, yet think thyself Poor and Naked without that Crowning Grace, which thinketh no evil, which envieth not, which beareth, hopeth, believeth, endureth all things" (101).

- (99) Imitation, Book I, Ch. 23.
- (100) Imitation, Book I, Ch. 2.
- (101) Christian Morals, 241.



Both men considered solitude one of the best of the virtues. As Browne says: "There is scarce any one bad, but some others are the worse for him; tempt not contagion by proximity, and hazard not thyself in the shadow of corruption. He who hath not early suffered this Shipwreck, and in his younger days escaped this Charybis, may make a happy voyage, and not come in with black sails into the port. Self-conversation, or to be alone, is much better than such consortion....Lose not the advantage of Solitude, and the society of thyself, nor be only content, but delight to be alone and single with Omnipresency" (102). Kempis says: "As often as I have been among men, said a philosopher, I have returned home less a man (103). It is easier for a man to keep retired at home than to be able sufficiently to watch over himself abroad....If thou desirest true contrition of heart, enter unto thy secret chamber and shut out the tumults of the world, as it is written (104), Commune with your own heart, and in your chamber, and be still" (105).

(102) Christian Morals, 270.

(103) Reference is to Seneca.

(104) A paraphrase of a passage in the Old Testament (Psalms IV, 5).

(105) Imitation, Book I, Ch. XX, sec. 1-3.

Browne is characteristically level-headed when he speaks of men judging men: "No man can judge another, because no man knows himself; for we censure others but as they disagree from that humour which we fancy laudable in ourselves, and commend others but for that wherein they seem to quadrate and consent with us. So that, in conclusion, all is but that we **all** condemn, self-love" (106). "Fall not into one name with that unclean spirit, nor act his nature whom thou so much abhorrest; that is, to accuse, calumniate, backbite, whisper, detract, or sinistrously interpret others" (107). "Fall not into the common prevaricating way of self-commendation and boasting, by denoting the imperfections of others. He who discommendeth others obliquely commendeth himself. He who whispers their infirmities proclaims his own exemptions from them, and consequently says, I am not as this Publican" (108). Thomas A Kempis advises us to avoid rash judgment: "Turn thine eyes unto thyself, and beware thou judge not the deeds of other men. In judging of others a man laboreth in vain,

(106) Religio Medici, 72.

(107) Christian Morals, 239.

(108) Ibid, 250.

often erreth and sinneth; but in judging and examining himself, he always laboreth fruitfully. We often judge of things according as we fancy them, for personal feeling bereaves us easily of a right judgment" (109).

## CONCLUSION

The quotations and comparisons which we have set down for the reader are taken from Browne's early and his later work and represent rather fully his ideas upon the subjects selected.

The habitual themes of Browne were those of the preacher -- the vanity of Glory and the nearness of death. These two elements wielded a subtle but controlling power over all his life and writing. He renewed these themes with singularly erudite reminiscences which rekindled the ashes of the most historical past and with constant reference to the interpretations by Catholic writers. Mortality was his constant occupation and by far his most powerful imaginative stimulus. The discussion on the vanity of life and the necessity of conformation of our lives to man's ultimate purpose is a sustained and majestic meditation because it is so close in tone and form to Thomas A Kempis.

While the late Renaissance was passing into the age of rationalism Browne preferred to rely upon the stable doctrines and comprehensive system of human and divine philosophy systemized in the Middle Ages. The Bible had been interpreted to explain philosophy

by Aquinas and for those interested in the formal and recondite the Summa Theologica was supreme. The more ordinary wants and soul-yearnings of humanity had been satisfied by the Imitation of Christ of Kempis.

When dealing with such problems as the dependence of man upon God, the nature of God, or immortality, Browne has unavoidable affinity with the scholastic tradition of St. Thomas Aquinas. Because he had such support he maintained his confidence in the reality of the spiritual world and in the validity of truth which the intellect alone cannot discover or verify. Rather than look upon man, nature, and God with human reason alone Browne preferred to look upon these with the eyes of Christian faith. He acknowledged his debt to the Schools not only by basing his thought upon Catholic works but by direct statement of the origin of his ideas.

When Browne was in the realm of metaphysics he stayed close to St. Thomas Aquinas, as we have seen. But when Browne discussed more personal ethical problems he used the Imitation of A Kempis as his guide. For the way of life he could hardly have made a better choice. The manner of living a virtuous life is discussed by Sir Thomas Browne in much the same manner as in the Imitation. Especially in the chapters on the vanity of

life and in the meditations on death was the parallel striking. In addition to these major ideas in Browne we have pointed out similarities in the considerations of the necessity of good works, the advantages of solitude, and judgment of others.

By thus pointing out various similarities in thought and expression between the Religio Medici and Christian Morals and the Summa Theologica and the Imitation of Christ we have indicated that Sir Thomas Browne grounds his ideas to some extent upon these works and thus have shown, however modestly, that one should at least consider Browne's scholastic elements as a necessary part to an understanding of him.

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SIR THOMAS BROWNE: BACKGROUNDS OF RELIGIO MEDICI  
AND CHRISTIAN MORALS

- I. Browne as a stylist and as a thinker.
  - a) critical opinion concerning the style of Browne.
  - b) general nature of his subject matter; weight of thought found in all of his work.
- II. Browne's Relation to the Seventeenth Century.
  - a) fantastic character of the period as exemplified by the mind of Browne.
  - b) Enlargement of the circle of secular and scientific knowledge. Browne's place in this enlargement.
  - c) changes in politics, social life, and religion; lack of certitude.
  - d) the attitude of the present day compared with the religious prejudices of the seventeenth century.
  - e) Polemical writers compared to Browne.
  - f) Steadily broadening liberal movement of the day.
    - 1.) Browne as an example of liberal, irenic spirit.

- g) Scientific inquiry and research in Browne typical of age. Common errors of the day.
- h) The seventeenth century as an age of transition. The library of Browne showing his attachment to the past.
- i) major interests of the day.
  - 1.) death as the most interesting fact in life, the favorite subject. Browne's historical sketch of the ceremonials and interments of all nations. Browne's attitude toward life, death, and immortality.

### III. Browne's relationship to Medievalism.

- 1. Breach made some fifty years before birth of Browne mainly political. Education still in Catholic tradition.
- 2. The long tradition of Catholicity; the English way.
- 3. Influence of medieval philosophy upon Englishmen of the seventeenth century.
- 4. Comparison of Religio Medici and Christian

Morals with the Summa Theologica of Thomas Aquinas.

- a) the nature of God
- b) conception of eternity
- c) religious mysticism
- d) unity of life

5. Comparison of Religio Medici and Christian Morals with the Imitation of Christ of A Kempis.

- a) similarities of thought and expression in selected passages.
- b) the practical rule of life as considered by the two writers.

#### IV. Conclusion.

The philosophy of Browne keeps to the scholastic tradition.

The Thesis "Sir Thomas Browne: Background of Religio Medici and Christian Morals," written by William David Wilkins, has been accepted by the Graduate School of Loyola University, with reference to form, and by the readers whose names appear below, with reference to content. It is, therefore, accepted as a partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Dr. Morton D. Zabel,                      December 27, 1934

Mr. James J. Young                      December 21, 1934